

ISRAEL NEWS
A collection of the week's news from Israel
A service of the Bet El Twinning Committee of
Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation

custody. Far from cracking down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Abbas is taking them on as partners: The official Palestinian media reported this week that the two terror organizations intend to formally join the PLO. "What's happening now isn't considered a calm," the leader of yet another terror squad, the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, told an Israeli newspaper. "It's merely a warrior's rest."

Events...

Monday, April 11, 8:00 p.m.
Mizrachi presents a lecture in English "From Purim to Pesach" given by Rav Shlomo Aviner, Rav of Bet El & Rosh Yeshivat Ateret Kohanim, at Bnai Torah.

Commentary...

Sharon's Retreat Is a Victory for Terrorists By Jeff Jacoby
In January 2003, Ariel Sharon won a second term as Israel's prime minister by crushing the Labor Party's Amram Mitzna, who had campaigned on a promise of uprooting Jewish settlements in Gaza and surrendering the territory to the Palestinians. Sharon firmly opposed that idea, which he had long regarded as a prescription for disaster. "Evacuating Netzarim," he had said in 2002, referring to one of the Gaza communities, "will only encourage terrorism and increase the pressure upon us."

But within a year of his landslide victory, Sharon turned 180 degrees. To the shock of friend and foe alike, he embraced Mitzna's plan for a unilateral withdrawal. There was no better option, he insisted. As painful as it might be to force 8,000 Jews out of the homes and communities they had built with the encouragement of successive Israeli governments, continuing the status quo would be even worse.

Sharon claims that a majority of Israelis agree with him, but it is impossible to know, since he has refused to put the issue to a popular vote. On Monday, Israel's parliament backed him up, voting down a proposal to hold a national referendum on what Sharon calls the Gaza "disengagement." Barring the unexpected, then, the Jews of Gaza will be expelled this summer as Israel's prime minister carries out the very plan he was elected to prevent.

The supporters of withdrawal make a plausible case. Defending the Gaza settlements exacts a heavy military and financial cost, they say, tying down far too many soldiers to protect relatively few civilians. Pulling out of the territory will shorten Israel's line of defense. And once Gaza's Jews depart, the terrorists will be deprived of victims to attack, thanks to the security fence that seals off the territory from Israel proper.

To many Israelis, leaving Gaza also promises psychological relief -- an end to the exhausting and unwanted burden of militarily ruling a hostile population. Norman Podhoretz, writing in the current issue of Commentary, quotes the blunt comment made to him by one Israeli at a high-level conference in 2003: "Why should we keep trying to negotiate peace with people who want only to murder as many of us as they can? Instead of going on with this charade, the best thing we can do is cut ourselves off from them with the fence and then let them stew in their own juices."

But the world doesn't work that way.

To retreat in the face of terror is to invite more of it, not less. Handing Gaza over to the gangsters of Hamas and the PLO will not leave them "stewing in their own juices" but celebrating their victory. As they take over the houses, farms, and schools of the people they demonized and terrorized for years, they will draw the obvious conclusion: Violence works, and the Jews are on the run.

Listen to Ahmed al-Bahar, a top Hamas operative. "Israel has never been in such a state of retreat and weakness as it is today following more than four years of the intifadah," he exulted last week. "The withdrawal marks the end of the Zionist dream and is a sign of the moral and psychological decline of the Jewish state."

Just as Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 proved a triumph for Hezbollah, so will Fatah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad revel in Israel's surrender of Gaza. The Lebanon retreat inspired the Palestinian Authority to launch a murderous terror war, the so-called "second intifadah." What fresh hell will the Gaza disengagement inspire?

A few days ago, Israeli officials learned that Palestinians had smuggled SA-7 antiaircraft missiles into Gaza from Egypt. Mahmoud Abbas, the "moderate" Palestinian president, announced plans to release two hard-core terrorists from

If the terrorists are this brazen now, when Israeli troops are still on the ground, what will happen when those troops are gone and Gaza becomes a safe haven for killers and radicals?

It isn't only Israel that will pay the price. "A Hamas flag over Netzarim will justify 37 years of terrorism," writes Michael Rubin, the editor of the Middle East Quarterly. An Israeli withdrawal will embolden rejectionists across the region. "If terrorism can free Gaza, why not the West Bank, the Galilee, Indian Kashmir, or democratic Iraq?"

Wars are not won by retreats, or with fences, or through the ethnic cleansing of Jews. Difficult as the Gaza status quo may be, what is scheduled to take place this summer will prove far worse. Sharon -- the old Sharon -- had it right: Unilateral withdrawal is a prescription for disaster.

The writer is a columnist for The Boston Globe. (Boston Globe Mar 31)

The Palestine Problem By Caroline Glick

With the Knesset's defeat this week of the proposed referendum on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's planned withdrawal of Israeli forces and expulsion of Jewish communities from Gaza and northern Samaria, the last parliamentary obstacle to the establishment of a de facto Palestinian state with provisional borders was overcome.

Although attention in Israel has been obsessively focused on our internal debate over the legitimacy and morality of Sharon's plan, the real story is what is happening on the Palestinian side of the tracks. For as Israel departs, it will leave a vacuum which will quickly be filled. And while Israel argues with itself, the Palestinians are now establishing the foundations of the Palestinian state that will arise in August.

Since Sharon has called his plan one of "disengagement," we find a stunning lack of engagement among Israeli policymakers with the question of what will become of Gaza after Israel withdraws. Such is not the case in Washington, where US President George W. Bush and his senior advisors are already moving forward with plans to restart peace negotiations with the "reformed, democratic, terror fighting" Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and his "reformed Palestinian security services" and his "reformed, transparent" bureaucracy.

After Yasser Arafat rejected Israeli and American peace offers in 2000 and the Palestinian terror war was launched against Israel, the chattering classes spent the better part of four years mindlessly debating whether Arafat was behind the war or whether he was simply too weak to do anything to stop it. The debate was both absurd and counterproductive. It was absurd because the answer to the question was largely irrelevant. If Arafat was behind the terror war then he was illegitimate, and if he was too weak to prevent it from being waged he was worthless. The debate was counterproductive because it prevented those involved from accepting the fact that the PA was a terrorist entity and that Israel had to do whatever was necessary to protect its citizens from massacre.

Today, Arafat's replacement, Mahmoud Abbas, has been accepted as a legitimate leader by the West. He has been invited to visit Bush at the White House. In order to strengthen Abbas, the US is transferring hundreds of millions of dollars to the Palestinians while pressuring Israel to transfer security authority over towns in Judea and Samaria to PA militias and release terrorists from Israeli prisons.

For its part, Israel has stopped trying to round up fugitive terrorists and has allowed Palestinian forces to deploy in Gaza, Jericho and Tulkarm. It has released hundreds of terrorists from prison -- two of whom were just rearrested Sunday night for assembling Kassam rockets in Jenin -- and is preparing to release several hundred more in short order. The government is so concerned about funding the PA that recently, Attorney-General Menahem Mazuz interfered with court proceedings regarding damage suits against the PA by Israeli terror victims. Mazuz asked the judges not to place a lien on tax revenues Israel collects for the PA pending judgment, promising that the government would guarantee any awards the courts grants the victims.

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But developments within the PA this week indicate that both Israel and the US have been horribly wrong in their decision to accept Abbas. As was the case with Arafat, for many it is unclear whether or not Abbas wishes to or is capable of reining in terrorists, and it is equally unclear that the question is beside the point. At the same time, in contrast to Arafat, because they have placed so much stress on Abbas's legitimacy, both the Bush administration and the Israeli government are clearly averse to mentioning that there is a serious problem with what has been happening in the PA since he took over. Their aversion is increased against the backdrop of Sharon's proposed evacuation of Gaza and northern Samaria and the effective establishment of a Palestinian state with provisional borders in its wake. This week we learned that on the military front the Palestinians are gearing up for the Israeli evacuation in two principal ways. First, they are acquiring weapons systems – such as SA-7 Strella anti-aircraft missiles – that constitute a major leap forward in their warmaking capacity against Israel. Second, they are organizing their military-terrorist forces in a way that will prepare them for the next round of terror war against Israel. Abbas's offer two weeks ago to the Palestinian terror groups outside the PA umbrella to move their headquarters from Damascus to Gaza after Israel's evacuation of the area shows that in his strategic thinking, the territory, once empty of Israeli presence, will be transformed into a center for global terror.

On Tuesday OC Military Intelligence Aharon Ze'evi Farkash testified before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that the Palestinians are now working to transfer terrorists and terror know-how from Gaza to Judea and Samaria. The Palestinian strategy is informed by the belief that Israel is vacating Gaza as a result of Palestinian terror; once all Israeli presence is gone, the main war effort will move to Judea and Samaria, where terror again will force an Israeli retreat. An example of how this strategy is being implemented was exposed during that IDF raid Sunday night in Jenin. One of the arrested terrorists had recently been allowed to return to Judea and Samaria after Israel transferred him to Gaza as a result of his earlier terror involvement. He acquired his knowledge of rocket assembly in Gaza and brought it back to Jenin with him. On a political level, this week we saw that Abbas is carrying out a radical reform of Palestinian institutions. However, his reform program bears no resemblance to the reform demanded by US President George W. Bush. Rather than expunge Fatah terrorists from the PA's bureaucracy and deny legitimacy to terror organizations while working to destroy them, Abbas has decided to empower, finance and legitimize them.

This week it was announced that Hamas and Islamic Jihad have reached an agreement with Abbas for these jihadist terror groups to officially become a part of the PLO. According to Dr. Michael Widlanski, who monitors the PA's media, Hamas and Islamic Jihad representatives claim that their decision to join the PLO is based on the PLO's staged plan for the destruction of Israel and its replacement with an Arab state. The plan, which was first adopted by the PLO in 1974, calls for the Palestinians to use any land that Israel transfers to the PLO as a staging ground for the next round of a war whose sole aim is the total destruction of Israel.

In exchange for this agreement to join the PLO, Abbas reportedly agreed that Hamas will receive 40 percent of the membership in all PLO institutions. He also accepted that Hamas and Islamic Jihad will retain their arms terror cadres.

There is reason to believe that the principal reason that Abbas is embracing terror organizations – granting them access to the PLO's vast finances, international legitimacy and power – is that he is weak. The riots by Fatah terrorists against Abbas in Ramallah and his anemic response to them on Wednesday, along with the attacks by an armed mob on a PA security base in Tulkarm on Thursday, are indicative of a sense among the terrorists that Abbas is weak and can be intimidated.

Yet the fact that Abbas is responding to his weakness by giving free rein to terrorists in the PA calls into question the entire rationale of the current Israeli and American policies towards Abbas and the PA. There is no doubt that unless Abbas completely changes his policies, Israel's hot and cruel summer of Jew versus Jew will be followed by a cold and bitter autumn marked by the return of the terror war.

For the US, the fact that Abbas has now brought Hamas and Islamic Jihad – groups that, like Fatah's Aksa Martyrs Brigades, appear on the State Department's list of terror organizations – formally into the PLO tent presents a less violent but still urgent problem. The PLO is allowed to operate an office in Washington, DC, because every six months, the president sends a letter to Congress stating that the PLO is not engaged in terrorist activities. Until now, Bush has glossed over the Fatah Aksa Martyrs Brigades involvement with the PA as Arafat himself tried to hide that they were an integral part of the PA apparatus.

How will the president be able to continue ignoring the pervasiveness of terror in the PLO now that Hamas and Islamic Jihad are overt and official members of the organization? How will the president be able to meet with Abbas or have his representatives meet with PA functionaries when the PA itself, after July's legislative elections, will be wholly penetrated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists (joined by Fatah-Aksa Martyrs Brigades terrorists) parading around as legislators and bureaucrats?

The EU recently sidestepped the difficulty of justifying its financing of Palestinian terrorism by hiding its head in the sand. In a report by OLAF, the EU's antifraud office, regarding allegations that the PA used EU aid to finance

terror, the following remarkable conclusion was drawn: "Some of the [PA's] practices of the past – such as the payment of salaries to convicted persons or the financial aid given to families of 'martyrs' as well as the Fatah contributions by PA staff are liable to be misunderstood and so to lead to allegations that the PA is supporting terrorism." While this sort of cant can fly in Brussels, it will be much harder to justify to the US Congress. The question is, aside from Abbas's overt preparations for the next round of jihad and his bringing Hamas and Islamic Jihad into the PLO, what has to happen for Washington to abandon him and to accept that the emergent state of Palestine is part of the problem, not the solution? (Jerusalem Post Apr 1)

Ariel Sharon's Folly By Daniel Pipes

With the passage last week of a budget bill in Israel, the government of Ariel Sharon appears to be ready to remove more than 8,000 Israelis living in Gaza with force, if necessary.

In addition to the legal dubiousness of this step and its historical unprecedented nature (challenge to the reader: name another democracy that has forcibly removed thousands its own citizens from their lawful homes), the planned withdrawal of all Israeli installations from Gaza amounts to an act of monumental political folly.

It also comes as an astounding surprise. After the Oslo round of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations (1993-2001) ended in disaster, many Israelis looked back on Oslo's faulty assumptions, their own naïveté, and resolved not to repeat that bitter experience. Israelis awoke from the delusion that giving the Palestinians land, money, and arms in return for airy-fairy and fraudulent promises would lessen Palestinian hostility. They realized that, to the contrary, this imbalance enhanced Palestinian rejection of the very existence of the Jewish state.

By early 2001, a divided Israeli electorate had largely re-unified. When Mr. Sharon became prime minister in February 2001, a wiser leadership had apparently taken over in Jerusalem, one that recognized the need for Israel to return to toughness and deterrence.

These optimistic expectations were indeed fulfilled for nearly three years, 2001-03. Mr. Sharon engaged in a quite masterful double diplomacy in which he simultaneously showed a cheery face (toward the American government and his leftist coalition partners) and a tough one (toward his Likud constituents and the Palestinians). The purposefulness and underlying consistency of his premiership from the start impressed many observers, including this one; I assessed Sharon's record to be "a virtuoso performance of quietly tough actions mixed with voluble concessions."

Mr. Sharon decisively won re-election in January 2003 over Amram Mitzna, a Labor opponent who advocated an Oslo-style unilateral retreat from Gaza. Mr. Sharon unambiguously condemned this idea back then: "A unilateral withdrawal is not a recipe for peace. It is a recipe for war." After winning the election, his talks in February 2003 about forming a coalition government with Mr. Mitzna failed because Mr. Sharon so heavily emphasized the "strategic importance" of Israelis living in Gaza.

By December 2003, however, Mr. Sharon himself endorsed Mr. Mitzna's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. While he did so in a spirit very different from the prior Oslo diplomacy, his decision has the same two main characteristics.

First, because the decision to retreat from Gaza took place in the context of heightened violence against Israelis, it vindicates those Palestinian voices arguing for terrorism. The Gaza retreat is, in plain words, a military defeat. It follows on the ignominious Israeli abandonment of its positions and its allies in Lebanon in May 2000, a move which much eroded Arab respect for Israeli strength, with dire consequences. The Gaza withdrawal will almost certainly increase Palestinian reliance on terrorism.

Second, the retreat is heating up the political climate within Israel, bringing back the dangerous mood of exaggeration, incivility, hostility, and even lawlessness. The prospect of thousands of Israelis evicted from their homes under threat of force is rudely interrupting what had been a trend toward a healthier atmosphere during the relative calm of 2001-03.

Mr. Sharon's plans at least have a disillusioned quality to them, sparing Israel the woolly notions of a "new Middle East" that so harmed the country a decade ago. But in another way, Mr. Sharon's plans are worse than Oslo; at least that disaster was carried out by the clueless Left. A Right – led by Mr. Sharon – valiantly and staunchly opposed it. This time, it is the Right's hero who, allied with the far-Left, is himself leading the charge, reducing the opposition to marginality.

There are many theories for what reversed Mr. Sharon's views on the matter of a unilateral Gaza withdrawal in the 10 months between February and December 2003 – I have my own ideas about the hubris of elected Israeli prime ministers – but whatever the reason, its consequences are clear.

Mr. Sharon betrayed the voters who supported him, wounding Israeli democracy. He divided Israeli society in ways that may poison the body politic for decades hence. He aborted his own successful policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. He delivered Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim rejectionists their greatest boost ever. And he failed his American ally by delivering a major victory to the forces of terrorism. (New York Sun Apr 5)

Let the Media Work Jerusalem Post Editorial

If it were up to some in the IDF's upper echelons, the impending pullout from Gaza and northern Samaria would take place with minimum, unchecked media coverage.

This design is neither feasible nor desirable, and sadly suggests that the IDF has learned nothing from its manifestly counterproductive handling of the media in recent years.

Apparently, the army's reference in this case is the Falklands War of 1982, when Britain successfully barred all media access to the Atlantic islands where the fighting took place. We very much hope that the army realizes that Gaza, unlike that forlorn patch of earth off the Cape of Horn, is hardly inaccessible; it's an hour's car ride south from Tel Aviv.

Moreover, even the kind of checked media access that the US Army managed to engineer during the First Gulf War is not an option, considering the proliferation, since 1991, of assorted high-powered, minuscule devices, from video-cellphones to the Internet.

It is absurd to assume that live and graphic coverage of the evacuation will be prevented by blocking reporters at places such as Erez Checkpoint. On the contrary. In doing this the media will only be tempted, and in some situations compelled, to resort to footage, sound bytes and communiqués released by assorted tendentious groups which will be in the field, whether as veteran or recently arrived inhabitants of the region.

Since its inception, the IDF has had a complex relationship with the media.

In its first decades, it benefited from the relative lack of friction with civilian populations and from an underdog image that made many in the free world blindly admire its cause, tactics and success. After 1967, however, much of that changed, first as the IDF lost its underdog image and became the ruler of a large and often hostile population, and then, in 1973, as its press operation's reliability was damaged.

The following decade, as the Palestinian uprising began, the situation was further exacerbated, when junior officers frequently encountered the press in the field and treated them rudely. The contribution of this attitude to Israel's image abroad is well known.

It was only in the past decade that some of this began to change, partly thanks to a realization in the General Staff - as articulated by former Air Force commander Eitan Ben-Eliyahu - that in the modern battlefield armies had better treat the media as an independent entity, alongside those in the air, sea and on the ground.

What that means is that the disengagement challenge calls for thorough thinking concerning the way it will be reported worldwide. Creating the impression that Israel has something to hide can hardly serve the government's purpose in evacuating Gaza and northern Samaria. Moreover, there is merit in the world getting a first-hand impression of the price the evacuation will exact from both evacuator and evacuee.

Yet even without this utilitarian consideration, the media must be allowed to cover the evacuation for the same reason it is allowed to attend a Knesset session, witness a court hearing, or scrutinize a ministry's annual report. The people have the right to know what is being done in their name, how their taxpayer money is being used, and how fairly their fellow citizens are being treated while forcibly being torn from their homes. It's a democracy, remember? (Jerusalem Post Apr 1)

Down and Dirty By Sarah Honig

I was going to write about it soon after the seditious call for arms was made publicly and unabashedly, before an audience of several thousands and in front of numerous microphones and cameras. But realizing that sometimes the wheels of justice grind slowly, I gave our law-enforcers time to launch their investigation and press charges against Peace Now Secretary-General Yariv Oppenheimer for his battle cry: "We are ready for civil war!"

Oppenheimer shouted his bluster at the Tel Aviv rally two weeks ago, mounted by what presumptuously and pretentiously passes itself off as the "Majority Coalition," but which patently failed to attract even a minority of the purported majority to participate in its much-hyped happening. No doubt, had the very same vocabulary been screamed out at a right-wing rally it would have generated outraged indignation among the righteous Left and swiftly resulted in a great clamoring that the law be laid down and the riot act be read against confrontation-mongering settler-insurrectionists.

Ever-naïve, I assumed that justice is indiscriminating and wouldn't let Oppenheimer get away with what's forbidden to those he passionately abhors.

But alas no. Israeli justice cheats, peeks though its blindfold and stresses different laws for different folks. In other words, Pinhas Wallerstein better not declare what Oppenheimer had.

Unlike Wallerstein, Oppenheimer & Co. can promote conflict with impunity. Oppenheimer isn't considered a rabble-rouser even if he doesn't eschew incitement and doesn't espouse nonviolence. He doesn't have to calm troubled waters. Quite the contrary, he further stirs and agitates them. He's spoiling for a fight, and eggs others on to get down and dirty in the hallowed name of peace.

When the Left goes on the warpath it's always for peace, morality and virtue. Its self-proclaimed high-mindedness inevitably justifies any means.

SO IT was during WWII's ominous prologue, when Europe's desperate Jews

frantically sought immigration visas (certificates) into Eretz Yisrael, but the Left, which controlled the Jewish Agency, made sure that political rivals wouldn't be granted legal aliyah permits. And when these rivals attempted to get here in quasi-legal ways (like exploiting tourist and student visas or resorting to fictional marriages) leftist guardians of legality turned them in, often raiding buses and cafes to find folks without proper papers.

At the same time, the more militant Left, under the aegis of the Communist Peh-Kah-Peh (the Yiddish acronym for the Palestinisheh Kommunistisheh Partai, which at least to some extent is among Peace Now's ideological forebears) took the war for "justice and legality" a step further. It too wasn't afraid of getting down and dirty. Immediately following the bloody pogroms of April 1936, the PKP plastered local streets with posters demanding "the repeal of the Balfour Declaration and an end to Jewish immigration." It opposed the construction of Tel Aviv harbor and repudiated each batch of new certificates issued.

Indeed as Arab terror escalated, proof mounted of PKP collusion (in incidents such as the bombing of Haifa's Beit Hapoolim and Tel Aviv's Fairgrounds). When Arab leaders themselves announced a short-lived hudna in the autumn of 1936, the PKP rejected any truce on the grounds that "Zionism drags Jews to hell Zionists and imperialists alone are to blame for these days of atrocity" - just as today's settlers are likewise blamed.

The more things change the more they stay the same. In the name of unity and upholding the law, yesteryear's Left delivered Revisionist underground fighters to hostile British hands in what came to be known as the "Saison" - the open hunting season. Alternatively, kibbutzniks captured their prey, imprisoned and even tortured them in the name of decency.

In time the license to hunt evolved into the license to kill, allowing the "holy cannon" to target the IZL arms and immigrant ship Altalena, despite the fact that Menachem Begin previously vowed to surrender the then much-needed weapons to the state and disband his own organization. Helpless immigrants, who survived Holocaust horrors, were shot in the water off Tel Aviv after jumping from the Altalena's burning decks.

These days many leftists hanker after "another Altalena" (i.e. Ami Ayalon).

But first they too skew semantics to make the killing kosher.

In pre-state days those who didn't toe the establishment's line were delegitimized as porshim - dissidents. In current parlance Likud loyalists become "rebels." Name-calling isn't incidental. It's essential to push opponents beyond the pale of propriety. That's why the epithet "extremist" is exclusively applied to the Right, while even violent leftists are invariably "peace campaigners."

When our far-from-impartial mass media routinely repeats tendentious down-and-dirty terminology, it eventually cements falsities and accords them the credence ordinarily reserved for indisputable fact. That's how hundreds of thousands of anti-disengagement demonstrators can be pooh-poohed as the lunatic fringe, while a few disengagement advocates can preposterously promote themselves as Israel's "moral majority." (Jerusalem Post Apr 5)

The Pope Who Loved Too Much By Shmuley Boteach

The foremost memory of John Paul II will be for his heart. When I conjure up an image of the pope, it is invariably in connection with some gesture of warmth and loving kindness to a child, to a widow, to the poor.

John Paul's ministry was devoted principally to the suffering third-world countries and his dedication to those in pain made him justly famous, inspired our own goodness and electrified the world. I confess, even as a non-Catholic, to a considerable sadness at his passing, attached as I am to the image of a gentle man, battling illness, and continuing to shower affection on the suffering masses.

In this sense, the papacy of John Paul will forever be remembered as an outstanding success because he came to symbolize established religion's foremost premise: that leading a Godly life makes one into a Godly individual, that a life of faith transforms its practitioner into an exemplar of compassion.

The exemplary love that the pope came to represent helped those who found the history of the Catholic Church scarred by hypocrisy. The pope brought a majesty to the Catholic Church and in this sense may even be considered Christendom's greatest pope because of the long ministry of love that he practiced. For this reason, all who call themselves religious owe John Paul a debt of gratitude for the respectability he brought to all who believe in God.

But for all that, John Paul's legacy will be mixed, having risen to the challenge of defeating communism early on, while failing to confront the terrorist threat at the end of his pontificate.

As the Solidarity movement in Poland began to pick up steam in the late Seventies, the world waited with apprehension for the inevitable Russian invasion to squash the boisterous pro-democracy ferment. At that time John Paul II, still a very new pope, wrote a letter to the secretary of the Soviet Communist party saying that he would resign the papacy to join the front lines of the Solidarity movement in Poland if Russian tanks entered his homeland. With that letter, he helped to save Poland and is justly commended for playing an integral role in the collapse of communism.

And yet, 20 years later, as George W. Bush prepared the world for an invasion of Iraq to rid that country of one of the world's most brutal tyrants, who had already slaughtered and gassed more than a million of his own people, the pope saw fit not only to oppose the war in Iraq, but to summon Tariq Aziz, Saddam's diplomatic puppet, place his holy hands on Aziz's head, and say, "God bless Iraq."

That an American politician could have seen Saddam's evil and scoffed at world censure in order to topple a barbarous dictator while the world's foremost religious authority was gripped by an inexplicable moral blindness, shall forever remain a stain on the legacy of an otherwise great man.

In a similar vein, two years later the Vatican made stunning comments on the death of Yasser Arafat: "At this hour of sadness ... His Holiness Pope John Paul is particularly close to the deceased's family, the Authorities and the Palestinian People. While entrusting his soul into the hands of the Almighty and Merciful God, the Holy Father prays to the Prince of Peace that the star of harmony will soon shine on the Holy Land."

Papal representative Joachim Navarro Valls went on to call Arafat "a leader of great charisma who loved his people and sought to lead them towards national independence. May God welcome in His mercy the soul of the illustrious deceased and give peace to the Holy Land."

That the world's foremost spiritual shepherd could describe himself as being close to Arafat's family, rather than the thousands of murdered men, women and children who were Arafat's victims, was an astonishing act of sacrilege. That the church could describe the death of a terrorist as "an hour of sadness" and call the soul of a mass-murderer an "illustrious" was downright frightening. That the Vicar of Christ on Earth could say of a man who stole billions from his impoverished nation that he "loved his people" was an affront to his own dedication to the poor and the persecuted.

Likewise, the pope did not visibly employ his considerable authority to condemn Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaida network, and the many other terrorist organizations that have made a once-peaceful planet so dangerous to inhabit.

How can we understand such actions coming from a man who I do not question for a moment was devoted with all his heart to the human family? Because the great failing of John Paul's life was that he actually loved too much.

Like a parent who cannot see the failings of a child, John Paul refused to accept that real evil lurks in the heart of men. He could not see that there were those whose actions had forever severed themselves from a compassionate Creator.

John Paul loved the innocent but he never hated the wicked. He loved justice, but he all too seldom condemned injustice. He fought for the poor and the oppressed, but he would not – aside from Soviet Communists – fight their oppressors.

Declaring in word and deed that hatred of any sort was an ungodly emotion, John Paul II never summoned the faithful to have contempt for the wicked but instead extended them the considerable softness of his gentle touch. The result of such misguided affection is that as he departs this world widely loved and admired, he leaves behind a planet where it is American soldiers, fighting and dying for democracy, who are doing more to create a Godly Earth than even John Paul's priests and pastors.

As a Jew, I shall forever remain indebted to John Paul for the respect and affection he extended to the Jewish people. The pope twice visited Rome's synagogue, diplomatically recognized the State of Israel, wrote movingly of the wonders of Judaism in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, visited the State of Israel and met endlessly with Jewish leaders.

But as an American I shall remain saddened that, as the world condemned America for removing the Taliban in Afghanistan and establishing a democracy in Iraq, the pope did not say that the real enemy is not those who fight evil, but those who soil God's green Earth by drenching it in the blood of innocents.

(Jerusalem Post Apr 4)

The writer is a nationally syndicated talk radio host in the US.

Where Learning Thrives By David Flatto

For one night, the blue, white and red jerseys that hang from the rafters felt out of place. So did the sponsor signs advertising Met Life and Panasonic.

There were no vendors shouting "peanuts" or "beer here." No half-time show during which some diehard fan had three shots at a dream. No kids waving banners or eating crackerjacks.

No. It was the Garden as I have never seen it before. Elevated to an entirely different dimension, the Garden was host to one of the most inspiring events I have ever attended - the 11th Siyum Hashas.

In a more palpable form than ever before, I understood what the term *koah hatzibur* means - the incredible power of collective learning, praying and celebrating. I am not sure what was more breathtaking: the thundering sound of 25,000 people answering kaddish, or the blanket of silence that covered the audience as it meditated on the words of *shmoneh esrei*. Both were exceptional moments that captured the singular capacity of myriads to publicly sanctify God's name.

Nevertheless, stepping back from the event, I think other aspects of the evening also deserve consideration. Specifically, as a Modern Orthodox rabbi and educator attending an event dominated by *haredi* sages, I could not help but

notice other features of the siyum. While most were predictable, if disconcerting - such as the exclusion of leading Modern Orthodox rabbis from the dais and the limited role of women - two secondary messages that made an impression on me were surprising, one relating to a topic that received much focus that night, and another which unfortunately did not receive its due attention.

A leitmotif of the evening's speeches was the tragic legacy of the Shoah. It was evident that many of the speakers (especially the elderly Rabbi Chaim Stein of the Telz Yeshiva of Cleveland) could only experience this siyum through the prism of the horrific events that Jews lived through some 60 years ago. Tempering the euphoria of the Siyum Hashas for these rabbanim was the realization of what was, what could have been, and what will never be.

AT THE same time, I was completely taken aback by the near complete omission of another theme from the speeches on this night. Disturbingly absent from almost all of them was mention of Israel.

Let me be clear - I do not refer to Zionism. A *haredi*-sponsored event clearly will not be colored with blue and white. Rather, I speak of an acknowledgment of the indisputable centrality of Israel for every Jew in the world no matter what his or her religious and political orientation.

I refer to the empirical reality that Israel is the home of approximately half of the Jews in the world. It has played a singular role in providing a haven for Jews seeking refuge from peril and destruction ever since the Holocaust.

It constitutes the focal point of the most basic existential challenges that the Jewish people have faced in the past half-century. Its welfare and security are now synonymous with Jewish survival and rebirth.

The failure of an entire program to acknowledge Israel's distinctive standing in contemporary Jewry is beyond my comprehension.

Even in the more narrow area of learning, the leading role Israel has played in the revival of Torah study is beyond dispute. Far more remarkable than a few hundred people returning to Lublin for one night (which was highlighted at various points in the siyum), are the tens of thousands of Jews in Israel who constantly sacrifice for their religion and love of learning. Living in physical danger and under financial pressure that is largely unknown in America, the outstanding dedication of students of Torah in the Holy Land is surely one of the great miracles of the revival of learning in recent times.

THE MESSAGES that are communicated at such a unique gathering for traditional Jewry - where an unparalleled number of men, women and children gather to listen, and learn from sages - are of paramount importance.

As such, the claim that the place of Israel in our lives was inadvertently neglected throughout a five-hour program is troubling and inexcusable.

Any celebration of Jewish survival and rebirth has to describe the seminal role Israel plays in our collective lives and national destiny.

Recalling our mandate to remember the Shoah and appreciating the central role of Israel for world Jewry are deeply connected.

Their intersection is best captured by the following insight of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein: Whereas many commentators understand the construction of the Tabernacle as atoning for the sin of the Golden Calf, Nahmanides understands it to be an independent, ideal prescript (housing the shechina that descended upon Sinai).

Yet, the sequence of commentary at the end of Exodus, where the sin of the Golden Calf coincides with the description of the Tabernacle, clearly implies that they are linked. Accordingly, Nahmanides must also acknowledge their interrelationship.

In explaining their connection, Rabbi Lichtenstein suggested that while the Mishkan was a prized, sacred structure from its inception according to Nahmanides, it certainly took on heightened significance for those who had faltered by sinning at Sinai. The people undoubtedly found great solace in the fact that God continued to dwell in their midst and that they have a house of worship where they can restore their relationship with God.

Rabbi Lichtenstein compared this to the relationship between the land of Israel and the Holocaust. Although living in Israel has been an ideal since the formation of the Jewish people, its renewed importance after the tragic events of the Holocaust is unmistakable. Having been brought to the brink of total devastation, how meaningful, propitious and miraculous was it to find their promised land available for their return? The crippled Jewish people discovered in this home a refuge, hope, and promise. There they slowly replaced their total despair with the more enduring possibility of a redemptive future.

We can only gauge our present situation by acknowledging the unspeakable loss that is still so raw of the six million martyrs. At the same time, we must recognize the definitive role that Israel has played in our history since that time, leading us in our recovery and holding the greatest promise for our coming days. (Jerusalem Post Apr 4)

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